

Interview with
Anthony P. Rios, President
National Community Service Organization
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The first Community Service Organization was founded here in Los Angeles ten years ago. For quite awhile ~~it~~ it was the only chapter. Then about five years ago, one was started in San Jose, and now, we have them in Alameda, Monterrey, Fresno, San Bernardino, Tulare, Imperial, Kern, Kings, Sacramento, and other California counties. We have several good chapters in Arizona also. One of our big problems is that we have no overall program. Mostly our chapters are concerned with local issues. About the only things that all of our chapters have in common, are work for pensions for non-citizens, and work to try to get non-citizens naturalized. Among the other things that we have accomplished--we forced the local Immigration and Naturalization Service to open up their exams to Mexican-Americans; before, all these jobs ~~had~~ had been lily-white. One hundred twenty-five Mexican-Americans have now taken the exams and many have passed them, and are employed by the service. Another thing for which we can take a large part of the credit, is the provision in the current Immigration and Naturalization Act; that citizenship examinations may be given in languages other than English. This provision is specifically directed toward ~~the~~ the Spanish speaking. Aside from that, I am afraid we have little to hold us together. We are always tugging and hauling on some question or other. For example, How much emphasis our program should put on the older generation. Up until 1953, the CSO was exclusively for the second and third generations, however, I was successful in putting through a rule that our meetings were to be conducted both in English and Spanish; and now we have many active members from the older generation. We have two meetings a month here in Los Angeles. We used to be lucky if we got an attendance of 50 people, but, after the McCARRAN Act was passed in April, 1953, with new provisions for naturalization.

lization; we put in this new rule with bi-lingual meetings, and we began to offer citizenship classes, and at our first meeting we got over 700 people with many more milling around in the street outside. We nearly went crazy there for awhile trying to cope with the situation with our limited man-power. One thing we have always insisted upon, is that the older generation, which comes to our meetings and takes part in our citizenship classes, must support our general program. They have been among our best workers in such things as, ringing doorbells during our voter registration drives, and so forth.

Another one of the questions within the CSO is how much membership participation there ought to be in arriving at the organization's decisions. It is the old question of whether the benefits of democracy outweigh the shortcomings, or not. Democracy seems awfully inefficient many times when you are trying to run an organization like ours, made up of so many different types of people; and there is a strong feeling among people like Juan Acevedo down in Riverside, that if we are going to get anything done, we are simply going to have to lay down the law. But, the majority viewpoint, which I happen to share, is that democracy for all its inefficiencies in the shortrun makes a stronger organization in the long run. Other issues that we are more or less divided on are, how much emphasis we should put on research, and how much on direct action; Here the direct action approach has always carried the day; and another somewhat related question is, how radical ~~ever~~ direct actions should be. This, of course, is something which is of much concern to many liberal organization~~s~~ which works in the field of politics and economics.

I was saying that we feel rather acutely the lack of an overall program. One of the things that we are thinking about as a way to fill

this gap, is to set up a definite set of policies geared with definite activities orientated toward the rural areas. Up to this time, CSO has been almost exclusively ~~an~~ an urban organization, but, as you know many, many Spanish speaking live out in the country. So, I feel that we ~~are~~ ought to be paying a great deal of attention to our small towns and our rural areas, and particularly our farm laborers. I hope that we can arrive at some agreement on this new policy at our executive board meeting of July 20 and 21. Now, when we get involved in considerations like this obviously we are going to get involved directly or indirectly with the bracero program. As a matter of fact, this came up at our last convention: One of the California delegations introduced a resolution which put the CSO on record as opposing the bracero program. Well, some of our fine delegations from Arizona jumped to their feet and said that this was a terrible thing. Some of their leaders, you see, are growers of cotton and vegetables, and so forth in Arizona; and are employing a large number of braceros. Well, when things like this happen, we naturally don't want to slap anybody directly in the face with the possibility of a walk-out; so, I am not sure how this resolution was handled. I think it was either referred to the executive committee or was watered down considerably. Speaking as an individual, I was in favor of the resolution because I feel that the bracero program is creating substantial problems for the domestic Spanish speaking people. and I will ~~now~~ give you some examples of what I mean.

First of all, I better point out that what we are accustomed to calling braceros, includes a lot more than just the contract workers; they make up only perhaps 50% of what I mean when I use the term. There are lots of ~~things~~ those who skip their contracts, most of whom come to

Los Angeles, and there are lots and lots more who are here with visas.

So, you should keep in mind as we go along, that when I use the word braceros, I am referring to all three of these groups; as well as any wetbacks who may be left.

I have lived here in Boyle Heights fro most of my life, and I have seen the change taking place in the past ~~five~~ or ten years. Whole streets here are filling up with braceros. I could name the streets for you, and I could take you ~~there~~ and show you where they are living. The young people are moving out, and a bunch of braceros ~~are~~ ~~either~~ ~~getting~~ ~~together~~ ~~and~~ ~~renting~~ will get together and rent a place where they live by themselves; or what happens in many cases, is that the older generation will stay on and rent rooms to the braceros. By and large, of course these braceros are themselves young men, but they get along very well with the older generation here. The relations of the braceros with the second and third generation of our locals are what you might call strained. They just don't speak the same language, figuratively and literally. This incidentally, is why you can always spot a bracero; even though he may be wearing ~~the~~ exactly the same kind of clothes, and have exactly the same kind of haircut, etc., as a local boy. There are certain idioms, and so forth in the braceros' speech which are a dead give away. So for this reason, he is not able to mingle freely with a bunch of his age group among the locals; unless they are darn well willing for him to do so.

There is a lot of girl competition, of course, The braceros are more on the aggressive side than our local boys, and the local girls often time respond to this; particularly they respond to those from central Mexico, places like Guadalajara, where the tradition is that the men are extremely flowery in their way of talking to girls. They really pour on the flattery, which is something that all girls go for, I suppose; and something which they don't get so much from our local boys. There are many, many cases of marriage between braceros and local girls; I could

rattle off a whole list of them right now. Marriage, of course, is something that the braceros are generally very anxious for--that is marriage to a U.S. citizen, because it makes their status here more secure. It makes it much more difficult to deport them in case there is any question.

But, even more important than the competition for girls, I would say, is competition for jobs. It seems to be a pattern that when a bracero first comes up here to the big city, he is practically overwhelmed by the number of opportunities for jobs. He seems to lose all reason, and he seems to try to take advantage of all these opportunities simultaneously. It is not at all unusual for a bracero to hold down two or three jobs at the same time, working 18 or 20 hours a day. Or another very common practice is for a man or woman who has just arrived from Mexico, to hold down a full time job during the day, and then set up a small business on their own on the side which they carry out on week-ends and in the evenings. Our locals who have been brought up with local conditions, naturally, tend to more or less take the opportunities for granted, and in this sense you could say that the braceros are more ambitious than our locals, and here is where the competition comes in.

Now, out in the fields it is pretty much the same thing. I used to work out in the citrus groves, particularly picking lemons up around Ventura. We used to have pretty effective means of organization. We didn't call them unions, but they had pretty much the same effect. All of us would get together and agree on how much work we ought to produce for how much pay, and what our working conditions ought to be, and things like that. We had a highly informal, but a highly effective system of controls. The guy who didn't co-operate with the group, was automatically considered to be a bastard and he was ostracized by everybody else. To

give you an idea of how we worked--when the picking was good, we would ask for piece-rates, and then we would work as fast as anybody; in fact I set a record for Ventura County by picking 72 boxes of lemons ~~xx~~ in one day, as far as I know this record still stands. But, when the conditions got bad, we would hold out for hourly wages, and if we didn't get them, we would slow down to the point where the grower was soon able to ~~see~~ things our way. Now even back in the days when I was working in the citrus, we had new-comers coming in and disrupting the standards which we had set, and which we were able to enforce with our informal organization; you can see how it would work. The only sort of enforcement we had was ostracism of scabs; and to ~~xx~~ a newcomer who didn't have any friends in the group anyway, ostracism didn't mean a damn thing. So these guys were coming in and killing themselves picking 40, 50, or 60 boxes of lemons per day, even under the most impossible sorts of conditions, and we just couldn't compete. By now, I think you will find that almost 100% of the work in lemons and oranges is being done by braceros.

We are naturally alert to any effect that the bracero program maybe having upon the assimilation of the Mexican-Americans. You might say that assimilation is the CSO's business, it is our only reason for existing. Well, here's my impression on that. In southern Texas you may find a very bad effect of the braceros on the acculturation of the local Spanish speaking, but in California you will find for the most part that this is not true. We figure that we have between eight hundred thousand and one million Spanish speaking people in California to start with; so when you bring up a bunch of braceros, even as many as one hundred thousand, they aren't going to affect us too greatly. We have the tendency of swallowing them up. The effect rather than slowing down our integration is to speed up their integration, we are making it easier for them. We

have been through their experience, and over the course of 40 years or so, we have slowly and painfully learned a lot of lessons and made a lot of advances. They are now cashing in on our advances. They are going through in a matter of years, what we went through in a matter of decades. I am speaking now of a place like Los Angeles. In a few areas such as Brawley, things maybe a little different, it might be accurate to say that the bracero program is having an impact upon the acculturation of our people down there. There are so damn many of the ~~nation~~ nationals and the Mexican-Americans have never been too well accepted by the Anglos community anyway, so there is considerable danger of the Anglos getting confused in their minds between Spanish speaking from Mexico, and the domestic Spanish speaking. The response of the Mexican-Americans in Brawley and places like that tends to be something like this: They say to themselves, 'these guys have their own ideas about recreation, and so forth. ~~like~~ All right, let them spend their spare time in the bars, we just won't go into those bars; and when we have a church supper or a picnic, or a dance; we will have it just for ourselves, and we won't let any braceros in.' I've got a hunch that if you really studied this problem, however, that you would find that it is less a problem of acculturation, that is less a problem of cultural differences than it is a problem of sex ratio. All the braceros, of course, are single men, young men, and this would hopelessly upset the ~~nation~~ ratio at an event such as a church social or dance. I think maybe you will find that this is the reason why the young people in Brawley, for example, have so little to do with the braceros.

My work is with the labor movement, and from this point of view I have definite ideas about the bracero program. They are making ~~like~~ it hard for labor to organize, not only in agriculture, but in ~~many~~ many industries here in the city which are being heavily infiltrated by

braceros. Recently I was working with the furniture workers union, and was trying to organize men in the various plants around town. The going wage at the time was \$1.65 an hour, which wasn't enough we thought, but I went into one plant, a pretty good-sized plant in East L.A., which was paying its men \$1 an hour, right across the board. Why were they able to get away with it? Because they were hiring braceros exclusively, that is Mexican-Nationals who were here legally.

We feel that the bracero program should be modified so as to put the nationals on equal footing as domestics workers. They should be permitted freedom of movement, to change jobs if they wanted to. They should be permitted to organize to join American unions, and to bargain collectively for wages and working conditions, etc. If this were done it would be to everybody's advantage. It would certainly make the task easier for the domestic worker, and the Mexican-National would quickly see that it was to his advantage also. These fellows are not dumb, you know, by any matter of means. In fact, I hate to say it, but I think you would find that on the average braceros are a sharper bunch than the domestics who, you will find, working in agriculture at the present time.